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Reagan Renews Effort to Get Arms for Nicaraguan Rebels

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — President Reagan, preparing to seek renewed military assistance next year for Nicaraguan rebels, denounced the Nicaraguan leadership today as "thugs" whose military units are increasingly dominated by Cuban military personnel.

Mr. Reagan said Nicaragua was emerging as "an international aggressor nation" and serving as "a breeding ground for subversion" by acting as a haven for more than 7,000 Cubans, Russians, East Germans, Bulgarians, Libyans, Palestine Liberation Organization members and "other bloc and terror groups."

The White House is canvassing members of Congress to see whether they will agree to revive military assistance to the Nicaraguan rebels, and a ranking Administration official said today that the President's address marked the start of a concerted White House and State Department effort to resume military aid to the rebels, or contras.

Combat Role for Cubans Denied

Nicaragua has denied that Cubans are taking part in combat.

Mr. Reagan's remarks follow the recent approach taken by the State Department. Last week, Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, testified in the House that Cubans were becoming in-

creasingly involved in combat against rebel forces in Nicaragua. Mr. Abrams confirmed reports that insurgents shot down a Soviet-built helicopter on Dec. 2 and said two Cubans were among the 14 casualties.

Two days after Mr. Abrams's testimony, Secretary of State George P. Shultz first suggested a renewed effort on aid to the rebels. He applauded the downing of the helicopter and said there might be "further steps" taken on behalf of the rebels.

In especially strong remarks about Nicaragua's leaders and Cuban military involvement in the Central American nation, Mr. Reagan cited "recent

disturbing events in a nation close to our borders: the Communist dictatorship in Nicaragua."

"It is a nation condemned to unrelenting cruelty by a clique of very cruel men, by a dictator in designer glasses and his comrades drunk with power and all its brutal applications," the President said in a portion of his weekly radio speech.

Mr. Reagan asserted that Nicaraguans were now being trained in Iran, that Nicaragua was continuing border violations against Honduras and Costa Rica and that "Nicaragua's connection

with the recent terrorist attack against Colombia's Supreme Court is now clear."

In that attack last month, about 100 people, including 9 judges, were slain in a guerrilla attack.

"What are we to do about such aggressions?" asked Mr. Reagan. "What are we to do about Cuba's willful disregard of the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, of which President Kennedy said, 'If Cuba is not used for the export of aggressive Communist purposes, there will be peace in the Caribbean.'"

"Well, the answer is more than we are doing now," Mr. Reagan said. "If

Nicaragua can get material support from Communist states and terrorist regimes and prop up a hated Communist dictatorship, should not the forces fighting for liberation, now numbering over 20,000, be entitled to more effective help."

The senior official who described the remarks as part of a new initiative to provide funding to the contras said: "We've all been increasingly concerned and the President has been concerned about the growing Cuban combat role in Nicaragua, and as you get into the next session of Congress it's clear we have to think about the nature of support we will give to the demo-

cratic resistance."

The official added: "This issue is going to be addressed early next year. It has to be. What we're doing is giving people on the Hill and in the country something to think about over Christmas and over the recess. It's a way of getting the debate going again."

Last July, after a testy political battle, Congress approved \$27 million for "humanitarian" or nonmilitary aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. Restrictions on the aid insured that the money was not to be spent on weapons or other military purposes, and was for clothing, food, medicine and other items for the United Democratic Opposition, the political umbrella group for the Nicaraguan guerrillas. The measure expires in March.

For nearly two years Congress has opposed direct Central Intelligence

Agency involvement in the Nicaragua conflict, largely because of the agency's role in late 1983 and early 1984 in mining Nicaraguan harbors. Both the House and Senate denied Mr. Reagan's request last year for renewed C.I.A. funding of the guerrillas in fiscal 1986. Instead the humanitarian aid has been administered this year through an office in the State Department.

"I think that everyone on the Hill realizes that the current system — of an independent office administering overt humanitarian aid — is a difficult compromise between people who wanted to do more and people who wanted to do nothing," Mr. Abrams said in a telephone interview.

"I think Congress knows this is not a particularly brilliant setup," he added. "The question is now whether the balance in Congress is going to shift to-

ward doing more or doing less."

Mr. Abrams recently completed a trip to Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama and Costa Rica, accompanied by Adm. John M. Poindexter, the new national security adviser. A key reason for the trip, officials said, was to seek to end Honduran resistance to channeling United States aid through it to Nicaraguan rebels.

White House officials said no specific military aid proposal for the guerrillas had been set in the new legislative agenda.